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ABSTRACT

In this study of the scope of reading and study skills programs in California colleges, 97 college catalogs, written for 1974-75, were studied, and on-site visits were made to 25 colleges. Information reported concerns the type of college departments offering reading programs, program formats and scheduling, diagnosis of reading needs, the degree to which catalogs accurately reflect program offerings, the need for the revision of reading programs to provide for more remedial courses, specific skills taught in reading courses, combined teaching of reading and writing, study skills training, and specialized courses. Among the conclusions was that the ideal reading program is an eclectic one, employing extensive diagnostic testing, a variety of materials, well-trained instructors, tutors, and paraprofessionals, and a balanced combination of individualized laboratory practice and classroom interaction. (GW)

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CALIFORNIA COLLEGE READING PROGRAMS:

THE STATE OF THE STATE

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CALIFORNIA COLLEGE READING PROGRAMS: THE STATE OF THE STATE

While college reading programs continue to flourish throughout California, no in-depth study has appeared in the literature which examines their scope during this decade nor attempts to interpret and predict trends for the future. At De Anza College, forty miles south of San Francisco, the establishment of an up-to-date reading program within the Language Arts Division was deemed imperative so that in 1975, I was granted two quarters' reassigned time from teaching to restructure our original program which had its inception when the college opened ten years ago. I studied ninety-seven California college catalogs written for the 1974-75 school years to derive a broad overview of the scope of college reading and study skills programs for the State and then made on-site visitations to 25 colleges whose seeming diversity of offerings might help crystallize ideas for the creation of a new De Anza reading program.

The following general observations regarding the state of the State's college reading programs are a result of the catalogs study and college visitations:

(1) The catalogs study pointed out that two-thirds the colleges in California specify a particular requirement for enrollment by students in some reading courses, while one-third have no such specification. The prerequisite was generally described as being determined by grade level or percentile achievement based on ACT, SAT, an English Placement Test, or a standardized reading test. Ten per cent of the colleges stated a prerequisite for a student to enroll in ANY reading course, making a reading course mandatory for a portion of their student population, while forty-seven per cent indicated a prerequisite for enrollment in some, but not all, of their reading courses.

(2) The catalogs pointed out that 77% of the reading programs in California are offered within English Departments which may be academic segments of either a Language Arts, Humanities or Communication Division of a college. Of these, five programs in Southern California were offered jointly within English and Psychology departments. One college offers some reading skills-related courses through its Secretarial Department. Twelve per cent of the colleges have reading departments of their own. Of the 25 colleges visited, 21 schools offered Reading within the English Department or Language Arts Division, 2 were part of the Southern California group offering Reading both in the English and Psychology departments, and two schools had their own departments. Instructors from the schools having their own departments voiced their sense of "aloneness;" instructors who taught in the English/Psychology structure also voiced concern about separatism, while instructors who were part of the English department generally felt the support of the department or division was highly significant to the strength of their programs and morale of their personnel.

(3) Both classroom lecture and laboratory practice constitute the program format at 59% of the colleges, according to catalog statements, while the make-up of 27% of the college reading programs consist of laboratory-based programs exclusively; six per cent of the colleges have no laboratory facility and hence their programs are entirely classroom-based. Visitations revealed that some catalog statements are inaccurate, or outdated. For example, one college's catalog indicated there was a reading lab facility which was not found to exist, while another catalog specified the program was entirely "classroom based" yet a lab was found to be in operation.

Unanimity as to what the terms "lecture" and "laboratory" instruction mean seems to be lacking in the community college reading world. At 30% of the schools visited, "lecture/lab" appeared to mean in the "lecture" portion that a student is given activities in a classroom or laboratory setting that center around various commercial individualized materials. These programed materials were the traditional approach that pervaded teaching college reading in the late 1950's and throughout the sixties when college reading programs were in their embryonic stage and a paucity of materials existed. While packetized programs do have their place and can serve as supportive materials, their emphasis should not be such that they replace the instructor in the classroom or laboratory. Are these kinds of materials sufficient not only to motivate but to teach and improve the reading skills of college students or do they not, in effect, constitute merely individualized seating rather than individualized instruction since all they require is fitting students into planned materials rather than creating programs to fit students' needs once they have been genuinely assessed? Oftentimes, such materials provide no actual learning experience since they have not been devised to teach skills but merely process a student through a series of drills. In a few cases, I found that all a "class" or "lecture" really meant was a

student working independently with a reading kit, or programed text, or a paperback book and a pacing device. One college provides a mechanical pacing device for each of its students; another makes heavy use of electrical pacing devices, while yet a third college lab contained more machines than students enrolled in a section of a reading class! Since reading is a communication process and not simply decoding the written word or performing countless drills, rarely can a lab-structured program as I have just described allow students to react orally with instructors and with other students about reading. If self-paced programed materials are the mainstay of a course's offering, how then is the communicative process developed? Somewhere along the way, students in reading courses need to be literally led by the hand and walked through the process of learning how to develop their skills. This means then learning and lecture in a classroom or lab ought to be centered around an environment where critical thinking, affective comprehension, exchange of ideas, and the teaching of reading techniques are the dynamics of a reading course.

(4) A diversity of options has become available to students enrolled in reading courses, particularly through modular scheduling. Instead of the traditional three-to-five day a week, semester or quarter scheduling, many California college's reading programs are providing a number of alternatives, such as mini-courses for the development of a single concept or skill. From the 97 catalogs reviewed, it was found that two schools offer 4-5 week reading courses, 3 offer six-week courses, 13 offer half-semester or nine week courses, and 15 have self-paced, open entry/exit courses with variable units. A description from the schedule of classes for one Northern California college might serve as a paradigm for one kind of course prevalent in the 70's. Entitled "Learning Workshop," segments of this course are sometimes offered as a one to two week "crash" course at the beginning or end of a school term but the entire

course is offered at some colleges, particularly for evening students, for eight weeks. It is designed "to help students solve ordinary study problems with specific emphasis on understanding and getting through reading assignments, writing themes, term papers and essay examinations, taking notes and setting up realistic study and personal schedules."

The catalogs also showed that forty-one of the colleges offer reading and study skills courses for students reading at any level within reading or learning centers. The more one attempts individualization designed to meet the specific needs of each learner, the goal of individualized instruction during the 70's, the more problems are likely to develop in managing the program. These sentiments were reiterated by well-experienced reading center coordinators at five colleges. The entire logistics of running a well-organized, fully developed reading center has become, for some instructors, a sixty to eighty hour a week job. What can alleviate part of that problem, they also said, is the employment of well-qualified paraprofessional assistants who usually need extensive training. These paraprofessionals, along with tutorial aides, are considered the spinal cord or backbone of some reading and learning center programs. However, the role of paraprofessional and tutorial aides needs serious re-examination. Ought they be given full responsibility, for example, in diagnosing, prescribing and managing programs and also be assigned lecturing duties?

Many college catalogs indicated that "individualized diagnostic testing" was an inherent component of the program yet visitations revealed that at ten of the colleges which specifically stated this, no such diagnosis is practiced. Many of the instructors with whom I spoke decried the paucity of up-to-date testing materials. Sixteen of the 25 schools visited use the Nelson Denny Reading Test for placement in their program or as a pre/post growth measurement. I have found that this screening device reveals nothing about a student's

particular strengths and weaknesses. Looking in-depth at college reading programs, one discovers that because few real diagnostic testing instruments are available, much of the diagnosis that is done, if it is done at all, appears to be a shot-gun/hit-or-miss/trial and-error method. While 50% of the colleges visited do use testing instruments either in addition to, or other than, the Nelson-Denny, the kinds of tests available, such as the Diagnostic Reading Test, California Achievement, as well as the SRA Placement, RFU Placement, EDL-Word Clues, etc. reflect the dearth of current published test material for actual analysis of college students skills' ability. What is specifically lacking are instruments which can help determine success in college courses which demand critical reading skills, such as recognizing author's tone and purpose, making critical judgments, and inference. The process of analytical thinking and the ability to synthesize, while present in some achievement tests such as the Davis Reading Test, have not been incorporated to any significant degree in diagnostic testing at the college level.

During college visitations, other options reflecting a departure from traditional structure were evidenced in California as schools begin to create Saturday colleges, Sunday colleges, combined Friday night-Saturday morning short courses, and even dial-a-course reading center programs. The Phone-A-Course-Everyday (P.A.C.E.) concept has spread from one Bay Area school to several other Northern California colleges this past year.

(5) Course titles, the catalogs and visitations revealed, are often misleading. "Misnomered" is the term one college reading instructor used when I questioned the use of reading machines designed to improve rate, as the core for a course entitled "Improvement of Study Skill." Reading "Laboratories" designed for regular college reading courses were found at some schools whose catalogs indicated the presence of a reading "clinic," another misleading term since

"reading clinics" can be interpreted to mean places for diagnosing and remediating severely disabled learners.

In the catalogs, some reading courses were ascribed "developmental" titles but analysis of the catalog description revealed emphasis was focused on remediating students lacking "basic" skills. In determining the levels of college reading courses available, I interpreted the terms "basic" or "remedial" reading to mean courses structured for students reading below a functional level of literacy, that is, reading grade levels 0-7; "developmental" was interpreted to mean courses geared for students reading between grades 8-11; and, "advanced" were courses for proficient college level readers. Catalog descriptive statements indicated that 69% of the colleges offer a reading course labeled "basic" or "remedial" and 74% offer "developmental" courses. Of the 97 colleges studied, 50% offer both basic and developmental. Twenty-nine different course titles were found to describe basic reading courses, the most commonly used being "Basic Reading Skills." Skills emphasized in these basic courses appear to be as varied as the number of course titles being used! According to catalog descriptions, 8% of the schools emphasized developmental aspects of reading exclusively and 3% emphasized developmental and advanced skills mainly; thus, one-tenth the California colleges in 1974-75 were not offering any basic or remedial reading courses. On the other hand, one-third the colleges, 32 in number, had comprehensive reading programs encompassing remedial, developmental and advanced courses, while 49%, almost one-half the California colleges, offered remedial and developmental reading courses primarily.

(6) Catalog descriptions pointed out that some developmental courses stress reading efficiency and depth of understanding, while others emphasize rate improvement, comprehension, the fundamentals of reading or study skills. Grade level proficiency to enroll in courses, such as "above 20th percentile on the

Nelson Denny" was also stated in some cases. Course titles designated "developmental" numbered 24; the most frequently used "Developmental Reading" appeared 17 times. Eleven titles were used interchangeably for "basic" and "developmental" courses. 60% of the colleges visited have reading programs whose emphasis was mainly "developmental," yet the numbers of students attending community colleges who need remedial assistance has been increasing steadily during the past decade. 72% of instructors from colleges I visited expressed a need to revise their programs because of their changing student population's skills ability. At one college in Sacramento, as well as at one in the Bay Area of Northern California, almost 70% of the student body needs some remediational assistance for reading and/or writing skills. The schoolwide average reading level at one Southern California college of incoming freshmen tested five years ago was 10.2. Last year, it was closer to eighth grade level. This past year, 30% of the students tested at De Anza were ineligible to enroll in the English transfer curriculum based on Davis Test scores. Also, the Palo Alto Times reported on April 6, 1977, that 35% of the students tested at Canada College in Redwood City read below 10th grade level and that for the Fall of 1976 at the College of San Mateo, because of their literacy requirements, 18% of the students were placed in English transfer courses, 35% in a remedial writing course, and 47% in a remedial English course designed for "very weak" students. The majority of California college reading courses were originally designed to assist students to read more efficiently, not to teach college students how to learn to read. However, it became obvious from the 1975 visitations that in some colleges, programs needed revision because they were designed for "advanced" readers but were drawing "developmental-level" students while programs that were originally structured for developmental readers were faced with functional non-readers. As a result, many California college reading programs are in a state of flux; at

least 44% of programs visited were undergoing some kind of revision and/or expansion in 1975; that figure is still higher today as more California colleges remodel their programs to try to meet the changing needs of students.

(7) 20% of the schools consulted in the catalogs offer "advanced" reading courses, designated by 23 course titles, the main emphasis being critical and analytical reading. Some of the colleges offer more than one kind of advanced course; hence, there are more titles than number of schools. Skills stressed in these courses range from the development of general comprehension skills to "discussion of discursive prose," "critical evaluation of print," "vocabulary in content area," and "logical reasoning." At 59% of the colleges visited, instructors wondered whether a course title itself might affect enrollment. For example, at several schools visited not more than one section of a course entitled "Analytical Reading" or "Critical Reading" fills a semester despite the number of students who need this kind of training. On the other hand, Modesto Junior College instructors said they find their Spelling course to be a "best seller" and attract more students than sections are available. The same heavy enrollment has been found true for courses entitled "Speed Reading." Some instructors indicated that changing a course title from "Advanced Reading" to "Speed Reading" doubled, tripled and even quadrupled student enrollment. Whether the course title itself is affecting enrollment or whether the actual needs of students are now being met needs further investigation.

(8) Regarding reading courses emphasizing a particular skill, 32% of the college catalogs listed some form of rate improvement courses described by 16 titles, the most common of which "Speed Reading" was used by ten colleges. Here especially were titles found to be misleading, or "misnomered", since description of courses themselves and visitation discussions indicated that the scope of these courses actually ranged from rate improvement to teaching general comprehension skills and critical and analytical reading. Rarely was it found that

"speed reading" per se was being taught and much heated debate in college reading circles has led to no conclusive decision regarding the validity and appropriateness of speed reading in the community college. At one college, however, a rate course "Reading Faster" does emphasize speeded reading techniques but is designed specifically for business and professional people rather than college students.

(9) Courses which emphasize vocabulary and/or spelling skills are offered either in combination or as separate courses. Catalogs specified that 12% of the colleges teach both skills through one course offering, so designated by four course titles, "Vocabulary and Spelling" being the most common title used. Courses which concentrate on vocabulary development per se are offered at almost half the California colleges, 49%. Twenty course titles were found for these courses; the most frequently used at 18 of the colleges is "Vocabulary Building." The scope of vocabulary courses ranged from "basic," "developmental," "advanced" to "practical" or were designed specifically for bilingual and foreign students, and areas taught varied from the study of word parts, ethmology, and linguistics to dictionary practice. Thirty-two percent, one-third the California colleges, offer Spelling courses which, in some cases are phonics-based. Eleven course titles were found, the chief one used being "Spelling." Specialized spelling courses discovered include "Spelling and Penmanship" offered at Fresno and "Vocabulary and Spelling in Business" offered at San Diego City College. Only five colleges (5%) offer separate phonics courses which are described by four distinct titles in the catalogs. Of these five courses, two emphasize both phonics and spelling.

(10) The combined teaching of reading and writing, indicated for 18% of the college catalogs, appeared sometimes as a "catch-all" offering as even course titles themselves revealed: "Basic Communication for Reading Improvement;" "Phonics, Reading and Written Composition;" "Reading/Writing/Study Skills." While catalog perusal did reveal some combined teaching of reading and writing skills, few

indications, save at Indian Valley, San Bernardino Valley and Santa Barbara City College, were found of other colleges attempting interdisciplinary study within reading programs. At Santa Barbara, for example, a one-unit reading course germinates from testing a class of history students and, then, based on individual student needs, creating modules of study in the lab. Students attend history classes four days a week in this program and the reading lab once a week as part of the history requirement. In the reading lab, the history instructor's taped lectures can be reviewed, techniques for study/reading the history textbook provided, and tutorial assistance assigned. Just this past year, Sacramento City College reading instructors, with the aid of a reading consultant, conducted two full days of in-service training for instructors in various disciplines and have begun commingling reading instruction throughout many subject area disciplines.

(11) Study skills training, taught as part of a reading program, was indicated at 31% of the colleges according to the catalogs. Some course offerings for which 28 titles exist were general in nature. One title, "How to Survive in College" exemplifies the main focus of the general courses. Specific study skills courses for which twelve titles were noted cover areas such as listening, notetaking, reading college textbooks, reading for information, term paper help, and understanding and writing exams. At nearly every school visited, instructors indicated they believe reading and study skills training are inseparable components of their programs.

(12) The catalog study brought to light some specialized courses, often offered at only one or two schools. Cuesta College, for example, offers "Basic Reading: Vocational" which stresses reading skills needed for vocational employment. Lassen College's "A-V Approach to Reading and Study Techniques" uses videotapes for developing reading skills. Southwestern College provides an in-service course for elementary and secondary teachers, "Eclectic Approaches to Reading

and Language Arts: Recent Research." Mendocino College offers a training course for potential elementary teachers of reading. A course in Dactylology is offered through the Reading Department at Modesto College. Cero Caso and L.A. Southwestern offer "Reading in Modern Literature" and "An Introduction to College Literature," respectively, courses for non-transfer or vocational students. "Reading for Pleasure" is offered at four California colleges. In some of the Los Angeles City Colleges, "Communication I: Understanding Literature" or " Reading and Writing: Personal Experiences" combine reading for enjoyment, improvement of writing, and development of listening skills and are designed for the non-transfer student. While visitations revealed no further unique or specialized courses other than those culled from the catalogs, it was discovered that some colleges are attempting to fulfill community needs. The underlying philosophy of these programs is that persons of all ages, be they 9 or 90, can be assisted in developing reading skills. Thus, L.A. Harbor, San Bernardino Valley, Fullerton College and Mt. San Antonio College allow the community to use the colleges' lab facilities during the late afternoon or on Saturday for community reading programs. Further evidence of a college whose program has diversified to meet community needs was witnessed at San Joaquin Delta which has a special course for students from Hong Kong, an afternoon program for fire and police cadets, and an afternoon children's program. At San Joaquin, a Saturday community reading program was begun in January 1977.

(13) An official course in the techniques of tutoring reading was found in only 4% of the college catalogs, yet many college catalogs indicated that well-qualified tutors assist in individualized reading instruction. Visitations pointed out that some tutors are given extensive "on-the-job" training.

(14) While the catalogs studied in 1975 gave little indication regarding the use of computers in reading and study skills, computer-managed reading

instruction does exist at De Anza College. Computer-assisted instruction in reading was developing at L.A. Southwest which has been influenced by programs developed at Orange Coast College. At few of the schools I visited were encouraging words expressed by reading instructors and lab coordinators for computer utilization; yet, in April 1975, at the Western College Reading Association's Eighth Annual Meeting, Gene Kiersteins, in his keynote address "New Learners: Focus on the Future" pointed out that the computer "on campus has tenure and can be in a large college the most humanizing single expedient we can use." Before the end of this decade, I envision increasing use of the computer on campus and hope for a broadening of reading instructors' views since the computer should be able to assist in diagnosing specific skills and prescribing tailor-made programs of remediation.

General Conclusions

At the close of one of my college visitations in Southern California, I was asked: "What is the single most important idea your visitations have uncovered?" My answer remains now, as it did then, that each college's reading program is as viable as the people involved and committed to that program. No two schools need ever design the same program but interchange and exchange of ideas can be invaluable in adaptations one makes in his own program. I have seen weak programs and strong programs, lecture programs and lab programs, hardware programs and software programs, group-instruction programs and individualized instructional programs, teacher-centered programs and tutor-centered programs. While such program diversity exists in California, many of the basic materials, including testing instruments, reading kits, and machines, are the same shopworn ones which have been in use for more than two decades. My final conclusion, after visiting the colleges, was that the ideal reading program was an eclectic one which employed extensive diagnostic testing to determine each student's needs; a

course of prescription utilizing a variety of materials; a strong core of well-trained tutors and paraprofessionals; a balanced combination of individualized, self-paced lab practice and classroom interaction; and, most importantly, instructors trained in the teaching of reading who understand the needs of the adult learner.

Often, when I discussed with colleagues their own programs and expressed my desire for innovation, and my concern for the seeming lack of originality and fresh approaches in existing programs, I was asked: "Why reinvent the wheel?" My response today is: "Why recycle the cycle?" Whether the "wheel of reading education" has been perfected and turned as far as it can go needs serious consideration as my findings imply. We might not be too far afield if we commit ourselves not to reinventing it but to modifications so as to shape a wheel that is more appropriate to the particular ruts and road hazards of the Seventies and Eighties.